

## A REPLY TO AIKIN AND TALISSE

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### ABSTRACT

*In “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,” Aikin and Talisse develop a critical analysis of the two central features of James’s ethics, pluralism and meliorism. They conclude that James’s ethics cannot accommodate certain basic moral intuitions. Moreover, it is alleged to foster conflict by overlooking demands that call for the suppression of other demands and by its inability to provide a substantive conception of toleration. I will suggest that James’s answers to the psychological and casuistic questions in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” offer a plausible response to the counter-intuition criticism. Secondly, the opposition of two versions of moral absolutism constitutes a problem for relativism, but not James’s pluralism. As a pluralist, he is not committed to the thesis that every moral belief is as good as any other. Even detached from his pluralism, James’s meliorism should not be understood to endorse religious warfare as part of a conception of improvement. Lastly, if this interpretation is correct there is no reason his pluralistic ethics is obligated to accept the intolerant.*

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“For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences...Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies” (WWJ 457).<sup>1</sup>

In “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,” Aikin and Talisse call upon pragmatists to move beyond the critical application of pragmatism and “strive to make their positive views relevant” in order to ultimately “supply a viable ethics.”<sup>2</sup> This exhortation is echoed in the introduction to their recent anthology, *The Pragmatist Reader*, in which they insist that pragmatists have the right to engage in metaphilosophical critique only after “pragmatist answers to first-order philosophical problems are viable.”<sup>3</sup> Because Jamesian pragmatists draw upon the

pluralism and meliorism he developed in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”<sup>4</sup> and elsewhere, A/T develop a critical analysis of this text that focuses on these central features of his ethics. What they conclude is that James’s ethics fails in practice because it cannot accommodate certain basic moral intuitions; it fosters conflict by overlooking demands that call for the suppression of other demands; and it further fosters conflict by its inability to provide a substantive conception of toleration.

On James’s account, a plurality of goods characterizes the moral universe. They cannot therefore be encompassed in a single abstract principle. Even his claim that “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand,” is referred to in comparative terms as the *most* universal principle rather than as *the* universal principle, implying that it could be overridden (WWJ 621). Because a plurality of goods characterizes the moral realm, James enjoins us to seek to maximize as much and as many of these goods as possible. His meliorism is an injunction to improve the world by seeking to produce ever greater satisfaction of demands through the realization of ideals geared toward evermore inclusive and therefore harmonious states of affairs. While this Jamesian statement may be somewhat vague, it surely provides sufficient ground for ruling out scenarios in which certain groups or individuals aim to violently impose their theological beliefs on others.

A/T indicate that they themselves take seriously the pragmatist methodological injunction to make philosophy relevant to life.<sup>5</sup> Thus rather than seeking to defend pragmatism explicitly, I will assume it and attempt to show that a coherent, reasonable reply to their criticisms is possible from within that perspective. I propose to respond to the criticisms in the following manner. To the first, I appeal to the psychology and casuistry, developed by James in the first, third, and fourth section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” to address the apparent counter-intuitive conclusions that follow from his pluralistic meliorism. Though James is committed to the claim that  $x$ ’s being demanded is sufficient for the good of  $x$ , this does not entail equal advocacy of all demands, nor in particular must one accept the demands of a tyrant at this point in history.

The second criticism focuses on James’s meliorism. I will argue that the conflict of two distinct versions of religious exclusivism is a pseudo-problem for James’s meliorist ethics because he is not a relativist. Because relativism provides no way of critiquing a moral position outside of its cultural context, it is vulnerable to this criticism. However, James is a pluralist. As Eldridge has stated, “[P]ragmatic pluralism does not entail the vulgar relativism that holds that

any belief is as good as any other. For a pragmatic pluralist, what is crucial is not necessarily the equal validity or legitimacy of all value claims, but rather the validity or legitimacy of conflict, dissent, and contestation in general.”<sup>6</sup> As Eldridge goes on to point out, recognition of this legitimacy should not be a goad to violence, but rather to the need for communication among alternative and even competing views. James’s meliorism and his exhortation for strenuous living should not be interpreted as a call to violence. Clearly James himself denounced violence as evidenced by his stance on social issues of his day and in scholarly works such as “What Makes a Life Significant” and “The Moral Equivalent of War.”<sup>7</sup> More to the point, I believe his meliorist ethics can account for such absolutist positions by arguing for the fallibility of metaphysical and theological beliefs as expressed by James in the opening statement of the fifth section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” Here he stated, “The chief of all the reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs” (WWJ 626). And again in his explicit writings on pragmatism, James stated, “Pragmatism has to postpone dogmatic answer, for we do not yet know certainly which type of religion is going to work best in the long run. The various overbeliefs of men, their several faith-ventures, are in fact what are needed to bring the evidence in” (WWJ 472). Even though this fallibility applies to a belief in moral pluralism itself, it severely weakens the legitimacy of moral absolutist calls to violence and the accompanying claim that this is somehow improving the world. As Ruth Putnam suggested in her reply to A/T, “one could read [religious] demands as exhortations to proselytize rather than as commands to commit mass murder” and by incorporating James’s notion of “the most inclusive ideal, however vague that notion may be, it is easy to see that an ideal according to which [religious exclusivists] tolerate each other at last minimally is ‘better’ from a Jamesian objective point of view than any ideal that includes ideals of religious warfare.”<sup>8</sup>

James advocated working to bring about the very largest total universe of good because he did not believe it to be practically possible to pin down a monistic theory of value or singular definition of the good. His meliorism is a response to his pluralism. Even if James’s meliorist injunction is divorced from his pluralism, any definition of improvement that incorporates religious warfare as means to an end courts a counter-intuitive notion of the good since it practically annihilates other intuitively compelling demands, such as demands for freedom, compassion, safety, and security. Such domination would require compelling evidence of the

correctness of the comprehensive doctrine. An appeal to sacred text and revelation would require universal or nearly universal assent, which is precisely what is lacking. Moreover, I doubt other moral principles will fare any better than James's when attempting to practically deal with individuals or groups committed to imposing their beliefs on others by whatever means necessary. I echo Putnam's claim that, "In fact, nothing follows concerning the adequacy or inadequacy of a moral philosophy from the fact that combined with false beliefs or a general lack of good will it leads to horrific conclusions or no conclusion at all."<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, if the preceding interpretation of James's ethics is correct, there are no compelling reasons Jamesian pragmatists are obligated to accept the intolerant within the framework of his pluralistic ethics. The criticism of pluralism's lack of a substantive conception of toleration can be addressed by again arguing that the burden is on absolutists to conclusively demonstrate the correctness of their doctrine. Moreover, a viable conception of toleration can be constructed from within the existing economy of diverse demands and desires through a pragmatic recognition of the limits of knowledge, a concomitant fallibilist attitude, and a mutual respect for the value of civility and peace.

### ***THE REPLIES***

A/T direct their first criticism at James's claim that "everything which is demanded is by that fact a good" (WWJ 623). They indicate this claim is tied to James's pluralism and that any additional qualifications for a good would put James on a path toward monism. The upshot of their interpretation is that while certain demands strike us as immoral (on their account this is so because certain demands are inherently or intrinsically immoral) and should not be met, James's ethics must regard their satisfaction as goods. The counter-intuition this elicits is the essence of the first criticism. To illustrate their point, they present tyranny and theft as examples. As I take tyranny to be the more forceful of the two, I will focus my reply to the first criticism on it. However, I will first offer a brief reply to the thievery example.

In similar fashion to Ruth Putnam's reply to the Betty Hood example,<sup>10</sup> I think one can argue pragmatically that it may be not only permissible, but possibly even obligatory for Betty to steal from the super rich, particularly because they would experience no frustration of their demands. If the divide between the rich and the poor were severe enough, it may be that she ought to steal from the super rich even if it *would* frustrate some of their demands because of the

act's propensity to satisfy so many other demands, including not only the demands of the desperately poor to eat, be clothed, and have shelter, but also demands for justice and equality if the social structures that permitted the king's accumulation of mass wealth are ethically flawed. One could even argue that it is bourgeois to claim that all theft is wrong, if those who possess wealth achieve or maintain it through corrupt means. Is all this really as counterintuitive as the criticism by A/T would suggest? After all, doesn't the praiseworthiness of Robin Hood's thievery underpin the moral of the famous fable and provide the reason for his protagonist status and the perceived villainy of the Sheriff of Nottingham and the King?

A Jamesian reply to this first line of criticism is initiated by A/T themselves. They anticipate James's reaction by citing a central idea from the third section of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" that addresses what James calls "the casuistic question" (WWJ 619). "In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed" (623). But, A/T argue, this reply misses the point because the real reason "we may justifiably dismiss the tyrant's demands is not that they conflict with other, more easily realized demands, but rather because the tyrant makes demands that it would be *immoral* to meet."<sup>11</sup>

As an initial point, I would note that a distinction is required between the descriptive expression "demands of a tyrant" and the normative expression "tyrannical demands."<sup>12</sup> The fact that a tyrant makes a demand does not mean it is immoral. The tyrant may wish to go to bed at 10:00 PM instead of midnight, but the association of the demand with the tyrant is irrelevant to its moral status. Surely A/T are referring to tyrannical demands. But to call a demand tyrannical requires explanation since this ascription games the system by building the normative element into the expression itself. This is not hair-splitting. The essence of their criticism rests on the intuition that tyrannical demands are immoral, and some explanation of what makes a demand tyrannical is needed. However to facilitate discussion, I will provide a functional definition by borrowing from Locke and stipulate that a ruler's exercising power according to will, not the law, for the ruler's private separate advantage and not the good of the governed as the basis of rule constitutes the exercise of a tyrannical demand.<sup>13</sup>

One can pragmatically regard the nearly universal condemnation of tyranny as reflective of its history as a form of social organization. The meanings attached to it have been born out of the consequences of its historical manifestations and the moral revulsion these consequences

produce. There is little need to test tyranny's practical consequences and the moral perceptions they evoke. These consequences and the associated moral intuitions have become attached to its very meaning. A functionally objective or practical condemnation of it operates in the existing moral universe due to tyranny's propensity to butcher other ideals like freedom, compassion, safety, and security and the fairly thoroughgoing moral aversion this induces.

It is true that certain demands appear to be "in themselves immoral," as A/T suggest with respect to those that are tyrannical. I think it is clear that such demands are immoral. This is so due to the conceivable practical effects of tyranny and the prevailing moral perception that these effects are bad. This moral aversion qualifies as one of those moral perceptions that deal, in James's words, with "directly felt fitnesses between things" (WWJ 612). In her reply to A/T's first criticism, Putnam attempts to defend James by appealing to this element of moral intuitionism that appears in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." As it has already been suggested, it hardly seems necessary to test tyranny for its consequences. History and the funded experience it offers have already thoroughly established what they are. Unfortunately examples abound. What makes oppression, violence, and genocide morally wrong? What but an appeal to the moral aversion felt in response to their consequences can justify judgments against tyrannical demands? Certain moral judgments, like those pertaining to tyranny's immorality, no longer appear to be connected to their source in collective human experience. Consequently we may come to regard them as, in A/T's words, "valid independently of who demands what" on some sort of static, a priori grounds. Their practical objectivity, having been established, tempts an intellectualist tendency toward finality. One might say with James, "There never was a more exquisite example of an idea abstracted from the concretes of experience and then used to oppose and negate what it was abstracted from" (WWJ 440). The upshot of James's view is not to render moral claims subjective, but to regard objectivity as grounded in a claim's functionality in the moral realm. The mysteriousness of a prioricity, with its absolute, universally-binding decrees that are supposed to stipulate once and for all what is right and wrong, is circumvented without succumbing to relativism, subjectivism, or skepticism.

The probable reason pragmatists tend not to posit their positive views (as A/T suggest they should) is because a pragmatist is likely to regard the content of one's own ideals as less important than the method by which one came to hold them. Consequently, so long as theorists attempt to defend moral views on some kind of a priori ground or otherwise seek to establish an

absolute good or singular moral principle, it is likely that criticism will continue to be the primary mode of pragmatist ethical discourse. This engages the experimentalism of pragmatism and its primary function “as a method only” that stands for no special results, in this case in the realm of ethics. While James may have said little about moral epistemology, his general epistemological approach provides some guidance for interpreting his ethical position and formulating plausible replies to his critics.

Lastly on a more critical note, A/T conclude their first criticism by arguing that tyranny and theft are in themselves immoral, because, they claim, “certain moral claims are valid independently of who demands what.”<sup>14</sup> It is unclear how these moral claims would establish such independent objectivity if not from their functional role, roles that derive from human attitudes toward them. If objectivity does not arise functionally through the collective experiences of the actual inhabitants of the moral universe, from what would it be derived? If one were to regard acts themselves as inherently good or bad, from whence would they derive their intrinsic ethical properties. Intuitionism only goes as far as intuitions are mutually recognized. Without a sentient being to regard an act as good or bad, it is difficult to see how it could be imbued with moral significance. If the answer is reason and this is interpreted to convey a universal status to certain moral acts, claims or principles, this objectivity is a priori and we are now in the realm of the intellectualism James (and Dewey, for that matter) criticized for artificially imposing absolutes on experience which is wrought with contingency that makes moral finality impossible. In his “Comment on Talisse and Aikin,” Cormier echoes James’s position regarding the mysteriousness of deriving conceptions of goodness or badness apart from “concrete satisfactions or dissatisfactions.”<sup>15</sup> In a passage quite relevant to the current debate, James commends moral intuitionists for carefully attending to the psychological facts, but criticizes them for mixing their insights with “that dogmatic temper which, by absolute distinctions and unconditional ‘thou shalt nots,’ changes a growing, elastic, and continuous life into a superstitious system of relics and dead bones” (WWJ 625).

The coupling of reason and past experience yields principles that inform the moral life, much like precedents function in jurisprudence.<sup>16</sup> This stability and objectivity in the moral (and legal) realm, however, should not be understood as final. Ethics, as with the law, is a growing, evolving system that remains subject to revision. In this way both are dynamic and fallibilistic in their constitution. Demands for revision will emerge in the course of experience. Ventures into

new forms of moral and social organization should be evaluated experimentally. As James stated, “these experiments are to be judged, not a priori, but by actually finding, after the fact of their making, how much more outcry or how much appeasement comes about” (WWJ 624). The inherited wisdom of past experience must be kept in the fore when considering such ventures. For James the right orientation is always toward the more conventional, for it is so much funded experience. But we must not turn these inherited insights into a priori absolutes. James referred to T. H. Green to capture the essence of this idea: “Rules are made for man, not man for rules” (WWJ 624). Principles offer substantial guidance and direction. To this extent, they offer great value. They should not, however, be transformed into mandates. Capturing the essence of this criticism James stated, “think of Zeno and of Epicurus, think of Calvin and of Paley, think of Kant and Schopenhauer, of Herbert Spencer and John Henry Newman, no longer as one-sided champions of special ideals, but as schoolmasters deciding what all must think,—and what more grotesque topic could a satirist wish for on which to exercise his pen?” (WWJ 622).

The target of the second challenge is James’s meliorist injunction to bring about the largest total universe of good. Combined with his pluralism, this entails that we seek to maximally satisfy demands while minimizing dissatisfactions. The best act is the one that on the whole awakens “the least sum of dissatisfactions,” and accordingly the higher ideal is the one “by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed” (WWJ 623). A/T claim that this unwittingly prompts violence because it overlooks an important fact of the moral life. Some demands do not merely compete for the same resources, but rather are in opposition to each other. Pluralism denies a single intrinsic value by means of which values may be rank ordered. The disagreement that ensues with respect to what constitutes the good leads to disagreement over what improvement entails. Thus without a means of arbitration, this disagreement breeds rancor and inevitably leads to violence.

To develop this second line of criticism, A/T present religious exclusivism as an example to show that James’s hortatory meliorist injunction is practically vacuous and ultimately prompts violence. Their illustration pits fundamentalist Christians and radical Hindus against each other. While both parties embrace James’s exhortation to bring about “the very largest total largest universe of good,” their disagreement over what constitutes the good and therefore over what actually counts as an improved state of affairs leads to war since violence represents the sole means for realizing each party’s ideal outcome.



Given the pluralistic ground of James's meliorism, there is some irony in the use of religious exclusivism to critique it. As presented, I believe this criticism presents less of a challenge for James's ethics and more as an effective illustration of the potential danger of absolutist views. The irony stems from the fact that while the challenge targets James's meliorism—which derives from his pluralism—it elicits the very trepidation some pluralists have toward monism and its potential to become absolutist. Clearly both parties in the religious conflict believe in a single standard of the good. Thus for each side, not only is the other party in conflict with one's own view, for the absolutist this is so because one's own view is unequivocally right as the other's is wrong. Taken to these extremes, monism becomes the basis of absolutist justifications for imposing a view on others by whatever means necessary. The historic inability to produce a satisfactory singular standard of the good is why for James, "pragmatism...must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side...and turn its back on absolute monism, and follow pluralism's more empirical path" (WWJ 417). This does not conclusively disprove monism, but this apparent inability lends empirical support to pluralism. Moreover, absolutism represents part of the conceivable practical consequences of monism. The potential consequences of absolutism are the very ones A/T associate with James's meliorism in their example—namely, discord and violence.

Because we tend to adopt the role of the spectator and dogmatically impose our own standards on others, we typically fail to sympathetically understand them. As Seigfried has indicated, James took this to be the chief barrier to morality.<sup>17</sup> A conflict over what constitutes the good calls for the casuistry James presents in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." The moral philosopher must vote always for the richer, more inclusive social order (WWJ 626). In James's system, a view that produces discord, antagonism and hostility by calling for the suppression of other views faces a difficult challenge. While neither of two competing views can be vindicated outright (this would be monism), we can still critique views according to the amount of outcry and dissatisfaction they produce. As Gale has indicated, it is the net aggregate of demand satisfaction less demand dissatisfaction that matters when characterizing James's melioristic injunction to strive for an improved state of affairs.<sup>18</sup>

Both the fundamentalist Christian and the radical Hindu defend suspect moral positions. Views that call for the elimination of others are, to that extent, endorsing a state of affairs that runs counter to James's call to satisfy desire. Now while the absolutist need not accept James

pluralism (his theory of value that posits a plurality of goods) when adopting his meliorist injunction to maximize the good, the burden is on the absolutist to conclusively show the absolutist doctrine is correct in order to legitimize mass violence or other forms of intolerance toward alternative views, religious or otherwise. Appeals to intuition, revelation, or the authority of sacred texts fail to the extent that others are unconvinced by them. Moreover, extensive demand dissatisfaction in both quantity and quality will occur if the religious exclusivist violently imposes her or his view on others. It is hard to see how one group or individual's conception of religion, assuming it is devoid of the violent streak associated with fundamentalist and other absolutist views, could be conclusively refuted by another, even if it is regarded as incorrect. "Whoever claims absolute teleological unity, saying that there is one purpose that every detail of the universe subserves, dogmatizes at his own risk" (James WWJ 410). Because the truth of such views is not self-evident or otherwise universally justifiable, the burden is on the absolutist to show why it is nonetheless. Short of universal assent, it is difficult to conceive what form such proof would take. Failure to do so in conjunction with violent attacks on competing world views can be denounced by other Jamesian meliorists as immoral on the basis of the extensive damage inflicted on others' demands and the absolutist's failure to conclusively refute competing theories of the good.

For their final challenge, A/T isolate and target pluralism. Pluralism's lack of a uniform essence of the good leads to disagreement over what is morally tolerable. A/T claim the resulting disagreement cannot be overcome by James's pluralistic ethics because a substantive conception of toleration cannot come from within the existing economy of demands and desires. An account of toleration that enjoins us to tolerate others demands even when those demands frustrate our own ideals, A/T claim, must come from outside of the existing economy of demands and desires. Thus it would appear that his position will either once again unwittingly countenance violence, in this case because it is unable to provide the kind of account of tolerance that is needed to prevent war, or it will betray its pluralistic essence by stipulating a singular moral principle, which would begin to imply a comprehensive doctrine.

Apparently caught on the horns of a dilemma, how might one respond on James's behalf? One possibility is to try to go between the horns and claim a third alternative exists. James himself took this route in "Pragmatism and Religion" in which he developed meliorism as an alternative to both optimism and pessimism (WWJ 466–467). Encapsulating the challenge for

the pragmatic pluralist, Eldridge stated, “This is part of the pluralistic paradox, that as a pluralist, one must be open to all viewpoints and yet in order to maintain this ability to be open to all viewpoints, one must also maintain a view which favors this openness over views that seek to limit viewpoints.”<sup>19</sup>

As the reply to the second criticism has indicated, James’s meliorism enjoins us to strive to make the world better. The question is how we should seek to improve things when there is often extensive disagreement over what amelioration actually entails. The apparent paradox this suggests can best be approached through the development of a conception of toleration that acknowledges and does justice to a plurality of goods and values. The fifth section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” stipulates that the reason “concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs” (WWJ 626). A final account is wanting. While a descriptive account of the plurality of goods does not entail a corresponding normative theory, the former does empirically tilt the normative scale toward moral pluralism. As Eldridge pointed out, James himself inclined toward pluralism because of its connection to concrete experience and its associated pragmatic value: “James accepts pluralism, and thinks that others should as well, because it is more practically useful for solving ethical problems. Pluralism allows us to deal more effectively with practical problems, because it coheres more with the world of science, common sense, and allows for free will.”<sup>20</sup> The fact that people meaningfully organize their lives around alternative views of the good life empirically suggests that again the burden is on the intolerant to show the correctness of their exclusive moral theory. In the absence of such proof, pluralists may denounce intolerance as arbitrary, unnecessary, and unjustifiable on the basis of a lack of conclusive support. At a minimum, it provides pluralists with a means to denounce absolutist attempts to forcibly impose their beliefs on others.

Pluralism allows for the possibility of the organic emergence of a demand for a shared account of tolerance, the kind that is needed to prevent war in a world of disparate goods and values. Just as, in Hilary Putnam’s words, “access to a common reality does not require access to something preconceptual,” but only “that we be able to form shared concepts,”<sup>21</sup> so it is that we do not require a singular moral theory to form a robust conception of toleration, but only the ability to form shared moral concepts. Toward this end, Eldridge emphasized the importance of communication and a willingness to seek to understand the values around which others organize their lives by stating, “Valuing the ability to move past conflicts in some way by seeing the

validity of other viewpoints, with the goal of facilitating communication and reaching practical agreement, can help us get to the real work of transforming experience and start charting the practical consequences of our actions.”<sup>22</sup> Recognition of the limits of knowledge, a concomitant fallibilist attitude, and an existing demand for civility and peace create the need for a shared view of tolerance among conflicting accounts of the good. The confluence of pluralism and meliorism should prompt us to do what A/T demand of James’s ethics, viz, “tolerate some of those who embrace ideals that are not merely *different from* our own, but are, from our point of view, not *moral* ideals at all.”<sup>23</sup> In this way, it is possible that a viable account of tolerance can begin to emerge organically from an existing economy of disparate demands and desires. Moreover, not only would this account remain connected with concrete experience, it is difficult to see in what other way a more practical conception of toleration could emerge, be justified, and be applied to a world in which competing views of the good operate synchronically.

This account of toleration may not satisfy A/T in that it neither specifies a substantive account nor mandates one. However it is difficult to imagine a monistic theory of value that will elicit universal or practically universal consent such that it may be used to produce a functional substantive account. James pointed out that although “[v]arious essences of good have thus been found and proposed as bases of the ethical system...[n]o one of the measures that have been actually proposed has, however, given general satisfaction” (WWJ 620). Without this sort of recognition, the stipulation of a singular ethical criterion becomes an arbitrary imposition on reasonable people of good will who are unable or unwilling to recognize it as all-encompassing.

## **CONCLUSION**

Central to James’s pragmatic grounding of moral principles are dynamism and continuity. Over the course of history, tyranny has produced vast dissatisfactions. The prevailing present day judgment that it is immoral is a product of its historically dire practical consequences and the ongoing moral perceptions elicited by them. Most reasonable, well-intentioned people regard oppression, exploitation and genocide as morally deplorable. These are some of the most salient elements of tyrannical individuals, institutions, and regimes. For a Jamesian pragmatist, tyranny is immoral. As Gerald Myers explained the Jamesian distinction, “True judgments are those that can be included within the objective, impartial philosopher’s most inclusive moral system, while false ones are rejected.”<sup>24</sup> The judgment that tyrannical demands are immoral can be so included;

its antithesis cannot. With respect to the second criticism, I have argued that violent religious exclusivism does not meet the standards of Jamesian meliorism in that it crushes other intuitively compelling moral demands like demands for freedom, compassion, safety, and security and it fails to offer conclusive evidence for its violently exclusive orientation toward alternative worldviews. Lastly, on the basis of a shared demand for civility and peace, a viable conception of toleration can emerge organically from within the existing economy of demands and desires. Its realization would be the product of a novel, shared account of tolerance derived from the discourse of diverse moral orientations and the cooperative effort of reasonable, well-intentioned parties holding differing and even competing views of the good.

Because flux is an essential part of experience, transition is a central part of being. If this is so, rationality cannot develop absolute moral principles because the principles it produces derive from the ongoing and evolving synthesis of moral intuition and experience. Through rationality, we detect patterns in the moral realm. But these patterns and the moral principles derived from them should not be interpreted as final since the ethical considerations that themselves underpin the principles are not ultimate or final. A moral principle's value is always contingently derived from the practical benefits of applying it to the particulars of concrete experience and its vagaries. How could it be otherwise in ethics if we are, in fact, dynamic beings in a dynamic world? As James stated, “[E]very real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists” (WWJ 626). This is what motivates James to claim that “no philosophy of ethics is possible in the old-fashioned absolute sense of the term. Everywhere the ethical philosopher must wait on facts...and the question as to which of two conflicting ideals will give the best universe then and there, can be answered by him only through the aid of the experience of other men” (WWJ 625).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To facilitate comparison with the paper by Aikin and Talisse, like them I will use *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), and the abbreviation "WWJ" in parenthetical references to James. Hereafter I will use the abbreviation "A/T" to refer to Aikin and Talisse.

<sup>2</sup> Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, "Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics," *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 3, 9, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/ta.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, introduction to *The Pragmatist Reader*, ed. Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1–11.

<sup>4</sup> William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 610–629.

<sup>5</sup> Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, "Relies to Our Critics," *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 28, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/tareplies.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Eldridge, "In Defense of Pragmatic Pluralism," Dept. of Philosophy, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Web, 5 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.philosophy.uncc.edu/mleldrid/SAAP/TAMU/P43G.htm>>.

<sup>7</sup> William James, "What Makes a Life Significant" and "The Moral Equivalent of War," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 645–660 and 660–671 respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Anna Putnam, "Response to Talisse and Aikin, 'Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,'" *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 26, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/putnam.pdf>>.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Putnam, “Response to Talisse and Aikin,” 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Putnam, “Response to Talisse and Aikin,” 24–25.

<sup>11</sup> Aikin and Talisse, “Three Challenges,” 7.

<sup>12</sup> This distinction derives from an anonymous reviewer’s recommendation on the first draft of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 801–802.

<sup>14</sup> Aikin and Talisse, “Three Criticisms,” 7.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey Cormier, “Comment on Talisse and Aikin,” *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 12–13, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/cormier.pdf>>.

<sup>16</sup> Dworkin indicates that while general theories of law must be abstract, “for all their abstraction, they are constructive interpretations” so that “no firm line divides jurisprudence from adjudication or any other aspect of legal practice” (90). Laws are objectively binding, but that does not prevent them from being processual and subject to possible future revision. The adjudication process of judges is constructive of the law, which is why Dworkin describes a judge’s opinion as being “itself a piece of legal philosophy” (ibid.). See Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Charlene Haddock Seigfried, “James: Sympathetic Apprehension of the Point of View of the Other,” in *Classical American Pragmatism: Its Contemporary Vitality*, ed. Sandra B. Rosenthal et al. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 91.

<sup>18</sup> Richard M. Gale, “Comments on ‘Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,’” *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 18, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/gale.pdf>>.

<sup>19</sup> Eldridge, “In Defense.”

<sup>20</sup> Eldridge, “In Defense.”

<sup>21</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Eldridge, “In Defense.”

<sup>23</sup> Aikin and Talisse, “Three Challenges,” 9.

<sup>24</sup> Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 404.